

Ruby Ahaiwe, Your Eyes Have Seen Me

President Rose, Members of the College, and Guests,

Thank you for giving me the privilege to speak today.

Let me share a little story with you. On a sunny Friday evening in August 2017, as I prepared to leave Nigeria for Bowdoin, my dad called me to his room for one last conversation. He said to me, “My dear daughter, I have no doubts that you will do well at school. But remember that you are a woman. No matter what books you read, if you see a man you like, bring him home and get married”.

Like me, many of you have faced expectations from family, friends, and even ourselves. You may have changed and pursued a dance major rather than government. You may have forgotten to call your family because you were in the library. You may even have never received an award here. But altogether, the stories and achievements of our fellow Bowdoin classmates and our professors constantly show us that it is okay to defy norms, to tread our own paths.

Well dad, I did not meet a spouse. But I did meet my hero, Nigeria’s most famous author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who was to receive an Honorary degree in my first year. I reached out, and amazingly, President Rose invited me to have dinner with her. We chatted and laughed all evening in Brunswick, Maine. I could never have imagined meeting Chimamanda at home. Bowdoin reminds us we can do what we never imagine, and we learn that courage and love make a life purposeful.

As I reflect on my college experiences, the word that stands out to me each time is love. Love in my Ibo language is *ahuru m gi n’anya*, which literally translates as “I see you in the eyes”. This word captures the infinity of love, and the empathy we get with seeing each other and seeing the world around us “in the eyes”. It also reminds me of the South African ubuntu

philosophy: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* meaning that a person is who they are because of other people. When I was signing my name in the matriculation book at President Rose's office, I felt as if I were being "seen in the eyes", that Bowdoin truly knew our names and recognized us individually. Yet, we signed the book together as a group, showing we all need each other. I feel a deep gratitude for everyone who has been on this journey with me: classmates, faculty, staff, my host parents, alums, and friends who see me in the eyes.

When my dad called me in March to say he had already bought a goat to celebrate my graduation, rather than my wedding, I was happy that he was as excited as I, to celebrate my success. And so, dad, while you're not here with us today, I do hope you someday meet the people so central to my Bowdoin experience. And while I'm not coming home with a ring on my finger or a husband in tow, I bring with me years of love, stories, experiences, ideas, and an invaluable liberal arts education.

Today, I invite you all to keep love deeply rooted in your hearts, to pause, to listen, and to truly see others in your eyes. As we leave Brunswick, I encourage you to use your education and opportunities to see others, to build communities, and to leave the world better than you met it.

A huru m gi n'anya. Not everyone will be lucky enough to get a goat today, but class of 2021, we are the GOATS – G.O.A.T. Greatest of All Time!

Thank you, and congratulations!